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SCIENCE AND RELIGION: Are They Compatible?

Daniel C. Dennett and Alvin Plantinga

New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, xii + 82 pp., ISBN 978-0-19-973842-7, £6.99, US\$9.95

WHERE THE CONFLICT REALLY LIES: Science, Religion, and Naturalism

Alvin Plantinga

New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, xvi + 359 pp., ISBN 978-0-19-981209-7, £17.99, US\$27.95 (hardback)

This very short – to my taste too short – book with its too grand title *Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?* does deliver what OUP's Point/counterpoint series seeks to offer: one author offering one point of view (Plantinga, who claims that the conjunction of evolution and naturalism cannot rationally be accepted) and another author offering the opposing point of view (Dennett, who indeed claims the opposite). However, it does not leave the reader any wiser at the end. At least, I was lost.

The authors both get chances to respond to each others' arguments. This debate-style setup leads to some quite heavy rhetoric, especially by Dennett, who at times misconstrues Plantinga's position to make it look ridiculous. While Plantinga just aims to defend the rationality of sticking to the true beliefs of theism which can be obtained 'in the *basic way*' (a typical expression from Reformed philosophy) in the face of scientific knowledge, Dennett claims that for Plantinga's project to succeed the burden of proof falls on him 'to show why his theist story deserves any more respect or credence' than 'Supermanism'.

While for Plantinga it is God 'who could have caused the right mutations to arise at the right time, [who] could have preserved populations from perils of various sorts, and so on, [and] in this way, by orchestrating the course of evolution, could have ensured that there come to be creatures of the kind he intends', Dennett asks why it couldn't have been Superman instead of God. Dennett's silly response is probably triggered by Plantinga's seeming support for Michael Behe's argument for intelligent design.

Whatever one makes of the support Plantinga offers to intelligent design (he writes that 'to me as a layman, [Behe's] argument [that unguided evolution is probably incapable of producing the elaborately complex protein machines of living cells] seems reasonably powerful, though far from conclusive'), his own main argument against naturalism – or actually against the conjunction of naturalism and materialism – does not depend on it.

Plantinga's main claim is that if one would assume naturalism and evolution to be true, one would have to conclude that our cognitive faculties are unreliable, and he provides an elaborate (I would say somewhat scholastic) argument for this claim. Again, Dennett does not respond to the details of Plantinga's argument, but he just gives his own counterargument that '[e]volution by natural selection, with its naturalistic presuppositions, *explains why* . . . beliefs that are

provoked by [the] eyes (and other senses) are highly reliable truth trackers'. The two authors do not really engage in dialogue but are largely talking past each other.

In order to gain a better understanding of Plantinga's position – and not get distracted by Dennett's noise –, his *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, which was completed after the short Point/counterpoint book, makes highly commendable reading. His overall claim is the following: 'there is superficial conflict but deep concord between science and theistic religion, but superficial concord and deep conflict between science and naturalism'.

In Part I, Plantinga devotes four chapters to the 'alleged conflict' between science and religion, focusing on evolutionary theory (and Christian belief) and on classical and quantum mechanics (and divine action). He provides detailed criticisms of works by Dawkins and Dennett, and typically ends with conclusions that defend orthodox Christian belief (e.g., 'Dawkins gives us no reason whatever to think that current biological science is in conflict with Christian belief'). He argues that science does not exclude the possibility that God has guided evolution, stressing that the claim of guided evolution is not scientific, but metaphysical and theological.

This obviously still raises the (philosophical) question of *how* God has guided evolution. Plantinga does not offer detailed models for God's guidance in the context of evolutionary theory, but in the context of classical and quantum physics, he goes quite far in suggesting possible allowances for God's intervention in scientific theory. For instance, he repeatedly stresses that the laws of classical physics hold for *closed* systems. Ergo, the thing one needs for the possibility of God's intervention is to assume systems to be *open*. This supposedly easy way out for Plantinga makes him vulnerable for scientific criticism. When he claims for instance that 'there is nothing [in classical physics] to prevent God from miraculously parting the Red Sea, or changing water into wine, or bringing someone back to life, or, for that matter, creating *ex nihilo* a full-grown horse in the Middle of Times Square', the response would be that the odds are very very much against these miracles from literally happening. I am sorry, but this is not the way to get taken seriously by scientists.

In his discussion of quantum mechanics it goes wrong again: Plantinga has found a convenient interpretation of quantum mechanics that has God causing assumed regular collapses of the wave function. According to Plantinga, 'the beauty of ["divine collapse-causation", DCC] is three-fold: first God is always and constantly engaging in special action; second, DCC shows how God can seamlessly integrate the regularity and predictability in our world necessary for free action with the occasional miraculous event; and third, it shows how all this can happen without and divine "violation" or interruption of the created order'. Here Plantinga's reasoning pattern really becomes clear for what it really is: a self-pleasing selective reading of science, which is the result of the starting point of his exercise that the Christian believer (or, more specifically, the religious subgroup that Plantinga represents) has the right to maintain his/her orthodox views on creation anyhow. And he does not want or need to convince scientists

of his theistic position, but he wants to convince theists that science is not threatening to them, which is not a bad aim of course.

Part II is about 'superficial conflict', where Plantinga tries to uphold Christian belief against some claims from evolutionary psychology and historical biblical criticism that are 'incompatible' with it. He is particularly opposed to the strong version of methodological naturalism. He is less opposed to historical biblical criticism based on a weak version of methodological naturalism which does not have beliefs in its evidence base which are incompatible with Christian belief.

Part III deals with 'concord'. Here he discusses fine-tuning and design discourse in a relatively subtle way. With respect to intelligent design, he concludes for instance that 'it is unclear that the difference in probability [for the presence of protein machines based on assuming either unguided or guided evolution] is sufficient to constitute serious support for the existence of an intelligent designer'. While probabilistic reasoning may not be able on its own to support guided evolution, Plantinga of course still holds that there are other warrants (knowing in the *basic* way) for that theistic belief. The most interesting chapter of the whole book is the last chapter of Part III, on 'Christian Theism and the Deep Roots of Science'. In that chapter, Plantinga offers reflections on the deep concord between science and (Christian) religion. He argues that the idea that science will be successful only if the laws of nature are not too complex, or deep, or otherwise beyond us, fits well with theistic religion and its doctrine of man as the image of God. Furthermore, he argues with respect to mathematical objects, such as numbers and sets, that they fit very neatly into a theistic way of looking at the world.

The book concludes in Part IV with a final chapter which lays out again – but now in more detail than in the shorter book – Plantinga's sophisticated argument that naturalism and evolution cannot rationally be combined. It does not read as a climax, however, more as an anti-climax.

On the whole, Plantinga's book is a solid piece of work, but I am afraid it does not add much of genuine dialogue between religion and science.

Arthur C. Petersen